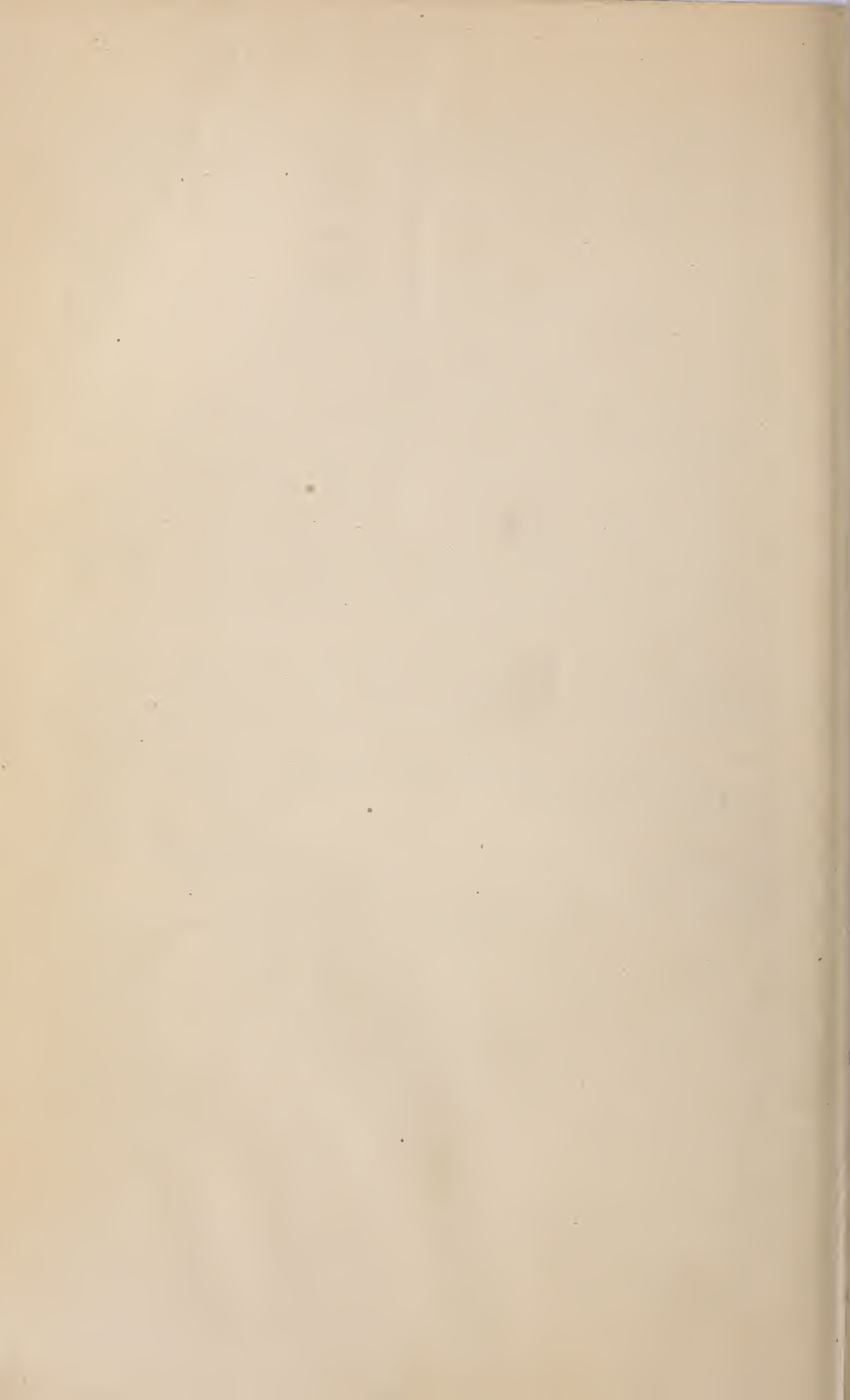


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United States Department of Agriculture,

DIVISION OF BOTANY.

THE LEBBEK OR SIRIS TREE.

DESCRIPTION.

The lebbek of Egypt (*Albizzia lebbek*) is a large spreading deciduous tree which grows wild in the forests of India, where it is known as the siris tree. Its leaves are compound like those of the honey locust. The greenish-yellow flowers are in heads of three or four together, and these are followed by strap-shaped yellowish-brown pods 6 to 12 inches long and three-fourths to 1½ inches wide.



FIG. 1.—An avenue lined with lebbek trees, near Cairo, Egypt, showing appearance in their leafless winter condition.

The trunks of the mature trees are smooth with light-colored bark. The sapwood is white, and the heartwood hard, brown mottled with darker longitudinal streaks. The wood seasons and works well and is durable.

ITS INTRODUCTION INTO EGYPT.

The lebbek was introduced into Egypt before the beginning of this century¹ and probably was extensively planted during the reign of Mohammed Ali, who was a great patron of horticulture (1805-1848). During the reign of the Khedive Ishmail, the French gardener, M. Braillett, in 1809 superintended the planting of many hundreds of thousands of trees.² Judging from those now standing in the city of Cairo and along the roadsides outside of it, the lebbek tree must have been one of the principal trees planted at that time. As a result of this extensive planting, the roads outside the city, instead of being tiresome ridges of yellow sand, unprotected from the fierce rays of the almost tropical sun, are cool, shady avenues covered so completely with a roof of foliage that almost no sunshine reaches the road below. One of the avenues, that leading to the great Pyramids, is over 4 miles long and the trees are said to have been planted at the time of the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, in honor of Empress Eugenie's visit to Egypt. I know of no other avenue in the world which compares with this when it is considered that this is a country of desert sand. Almost the only other trees visible are the date palms and gum-bearing acacias. There is certainly no more striking example in the world of the blessings of judicious selection and extended planting of a single shade tree.

In many respects the lebbek tree is an ideal one for southern roadsides. It grows rapidly, produces a dense shade, thrives in soils which contain little moisture, and is as easily transplanted and propagated by cuttings as a willow. Large trees can be dug up, severely pruned back, and set out, with very little risk of their dying. The crowns and irregular branches of the tree are unsymmetrical enough to relieve that monotony incident to long rows of such trees as the Lombardy poplar, so common in Italy and Chile and in Utah, or the cypress so continually met with about north Italian cities.

METHOD OF SETTING AVENUES.

The method of setting avenues of this tree differs from the ordinary in that instead of very young saplings being planted along the roadsides and protected with wire or wooden railings, the trees, started from seed, are allowed to remain in the nursery from 3 to 4 years until the trunks are 6 inches in diameter. These 4-year-old trees are then dug up, closely cut back, both root and branch, and planted along the roadside where they are to remain. They have, before transplanting, become so strong that no artificial protection is needed. The trees along many of the avenues are pollarded every few years and only three or four large, vigorous new shoots are allowed to grow. Unfortunately these irregular branches are often insecurely attached to the main trunk and are broken off during violent wind storms.

¹ Onderlind, O. V. *Die Landwirtschaft in Aegypten*. Leipzig, 1899, p. 16.

² Baedeker's *Egypt*, 1898, p. lxxi.

BEST METHOD OF CULTURE.

Mr. Christian Stamm, one of the oldest resident horticulturists in Egypt, advises, as the best method of culture, planting the seeds in good rich soil, 3 feet apart, and allowing the seedlings to remain where first planted for four years. By that time, in Egypt, they are 4 to 6 inches in diameter. They should then be dug up and the top cut back to the height desired for the trunk of the mature tree. Transplanting is done in Egypt only just as the new leaves are forming. At this season the vigorous trunks send out large, rapidly growing branches and form in the first year a crown at least 6 feet in diameter, covered with dense foliage. In the second year a very pretty avenue is formed. During the first year the transplanted trees require occasional watering



Fig. 2—An avenue lined with lebbek trees, near Cairo, Egypt.

and respond quickly to every drop of water given them. They are, however, deep feeders and may be expected to grow well in such southern desert regions of America as have a moist subsoil even at some considerable depth. The tree grows to a large size. Specimens in Egypt have been measured and found to be over 9 feet in circumference.

USES AND HARDINESS OF THE TREE.

Although as an economic plant, according to Watt's Dictionary, the lebbek is esteemed more or less highly for fodder in India, it has no interest to Americans in that regard. Although the tender branches and foliage may be eaten by camels in India, the chances are that stock

would have first to be reduced to a condition of semistarvation before touching them. In Egypt I have not heard of the use of lebbek foliage as a forage.

The bark of the tree is used by the fellaheen or native farmer for dyeing purposes, and the wood makes a fair timber.

I have not been able to satisfy myself as to the hardiness of the lebbek tree, since such frosts as are reported to have occurred in Cairo have been at long intervals. The probabilities are, however, that it will withstand slight frost, and experiments to test its hardiness are worthy of being thoroughly made. It may be expected to succeed, therefore, in southern California, Arizona, and Florida, possibly also in Texas and Louisiana.

Both seeds and cuttings of this tree have been imported by this Department, which will be distributed to experiment stations and individual experimenters in the warmer portions of the United States.

DAVID G. FAIRCHILD,
Agricultural Explorer.

Approved:

JAMES WILSON,
Secretary of Agriculture.

WASHINGTON, D. C., *February 3, 1900.*

